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Landau: Objective, But Never Detached

By Pat Dowell

"I'm terrible on this side of the camera," Saul Landau grimaces as a photographer starts to take his picture.

Landau is not at all shy behind the camera. In fact, he's particularly adept at capturing the more elusive human elements of the situations before his camera. He is Washington's foremost, and probably least generally appreciated, documentary filmmaker.

Tonight, the Institute for Policy Studies begins a five-week series of his films, beginning with "Paul Jacobs and the Nuclear Gang," co-written and directed with Jack Willis in 1979.

The series continues May 1 with "Que Hacer?" – the film Landau made with Nina Serrano and Raul Ruiz during the Chilean elections of 1970. Documentary footage sets the scene for a fictional story of political intrigue and transformation. It will be followed on May 8 by "Who Shot Alexander Hamilton?" – a witty look at the Watergate Congress and its peculiarities.

The harrowing "Brazil: Report on Torture," in which Landau and Haskell Wexler interviewed exiled Brazilian prisoners, will be shown May 15. The series closes on May 22 with two fascinating portraits of federal whistle-blowers in "The CIA Case Officer" and "The Swine Flu Caper." All shows start at 7 p.m. at 1901 Q St. NW, and will be followed by discussions with guest speakers. Admission is $3.50, with a series discount available.

The opening film, "Paul Jacobs and the Nuclear Gang," won the George Polk Award for investigative journalism in 1979 and an Emmy for best documentary. In it, reporter Paul Jacobs – himself dying of a rare cancer, thought to have been contracted during his reportage on low-level radiation in 1957 – examines the way various government agencies have covered up the effects of nuclear testing and the nuclear-energy industry in the United States.

The film is a remarkably moving document, a human portrait of a friend making his last stand in a long struggle against bureaucracy and secrecy, as well as a revealing piece of journalism. It is probably Landau's best-known film, though it is only one of more than two dozen he has worked on since he wrote his first script, for Robert Nelson's famous satirical short, "O Dem Watermelons," in 1966.

At the time, Landau was a playwright for the San Francisco Mime Troop. Shortly thereafter, public television station KQED hired him to write and co-produce a film about life in the black ghetto of Oakland.

"In those days, white people still did that," Landau says. The resulting film, "Losing Just the Same," was a controversial success, incorporating fantasy sequences acted by the subjects of the documentary.

He continued to produce films for public television, but kept locking horns with cautious executives over journalistic standards and conventional cinematic language. ("That grammar is industrial and serves the same function as automobile design," he says of Hollywood's ideas about structuring information and drama.) He became an independent producer.

Landau likes his privacy, which is one reason the public doesn't know much about him. But another is the fact that the subjects he is moved to film are nearly always controversial political and social problems – the kind of things that often scare off the mainstream media and are the daily meat of the Institute for Policy Studies, where he is a fellow.

"Working at IPS provides me with a lot of freedom I wouldn't otherwise have," Landau says, propping his chair back against a filing cabinet. Someone waves to him from across Q Street, where IPS has more offices on the upper floor of the old Anchorage Building. Landau waves back and laughs.

He wears [illegible] pled corduroy [illegible] shoes. His office is crowded with books and posters of the movements he has been part of (the first was an effort to recall Sen. Joseph McCarthy, the "Joe-must-go" campaign at the University of Wisconsin in the '50s) in his career as a political activist, journalist and filmmaker.

Landau is an incredibly boyish 45, with laugh lines around his eyes and a ready smile, but when you look at the posters and think of the books and films, it's sobering to remember how many of his friends and co-workers have died doing their work.

There was Paul Jacobs, for instance, with whom Landau completed two books of documentary history about the anti-war movement and racism. Jacobs died of cancer during the filming of "Paul Jacobs and the Nuclear Gang." Landau's most recent book, "Assassination on Embassy Row," written with John Dinges, chronicled the 1976 bombing murder in Washington of IPS colleagues and friends Orlando Letelier and Ronni Moffat. And some of those who worked with Landau on "Que Hacer?" have since been imprisoned or executed by the military junta that overthrew Salvador Allende in 1973.

It was during the making of "Que Hacer?" that Landau met Haskell Wexler, whose camera work has graced many Hollywood features, including "Bound for Glory," for which he won an Oscar. Wexler had just directed "Medium Cool" and agreed to invest some money in Landau's film.

"We just immediately became friends," Landau recalls, especially after Wexler joined him for a trip to Thunderbird College in Arizona, where "Fidel," Landau's intimate film portrait of Fidel Castro as both man and leader, was to be shown.

"It seems this was a place that was set up by the CIA and major multinational corporations to train foreign students to serve as executives overseas," Landau says. "Among the student body were several veterans of the Bay of Pigs. It was pretty interesting. I was hanging in effigy from the gate as we drove in."

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